


Social Marketing for Prevention

 In recent years, public health professionals and prevention advocates have become increasingly sophisticated in designing and executing public communications campaigns, primarily as a result of the "consumer" orientation that characterizes Madison Avenue's approach to marketing.

Social marketing refers to the application of basic marketing principles to the design and implementation of programs and information campaigns that advance social causes such as alcohol and other drug prevention.

The term *social marketing* is sometimes misused to describe any advertising or mass media campaign that is intended to advance a social cause. In fact, a social marketing campaign always involves a disciplined and iterative process for developing programs, services, and informational materials that are fundamentally consumer oriented in nature.

A social marketing campaign that applies the consumer orientation can be especially helpful in changing social norms on campus and in promoting a climate of support for broad environmental changes that will affect the decisions that students make about alcohol and other drug use.

Keys to a Successful Social Marketing Program

One essential element in successful social marketing is research-driven planning. The first step in a new campaign is to specify realistic and measurable objectives, based on a review of existing research and previous campaigns. You will want to develop preliminary plans that include an overview of campaign activities designed to achieve each objective coupled with outcome measures to assess the progress of the campaign and its success.

Your early planning will also involve extensive formative research to identify and then develop a rich understanding of the target audience. Focus groups and one-on-one interviews are the qualitative

methods most often used by social marketers. Such research is especially valued for the new insights it can generate about the target audience's knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values, customs, behavior, and general life circumstances that will then be reflected in the campaign's messages.

Also conduct background research to examine communication channels that are best suited for reaching the target audience. Which channels are chosen will depend on the target audience's preferences, available resources, and access to collaborating programs, organizations, or institutions, including the mass media (e.g., student newspapers, radio, and television stations). Make sure that publicly identified campaign sponsors or distributors are viewed as credible sources by your target audience.

Once development of campaign materials is underway, conduct extensive pretesting to ensure that they are appropriate for and appeal to your target group. Many design options are available to campaign designers, each with strengths and weaknesses. Because past experience is an imperfect guide, experts often disagree about how campaign messages should be designed. Even when they do agree, keep in mind that no rule of advertising works all the time.

Thus, there is no substitute for careful pretesting at each stage of materials development — message concepts (that is, brief summaries of key benefits or "promises"), preliminary media executions, and finished products. Pretesting allows you to establish that messages are attention-getting, clear and understandable, factually accurate and up-to-date, memorable, attractive, credible, and acceptable to your target audience.

Don't Drink and Bike

At the University of California, Santa Barbara, communications students earn course credit while they design campus-wide mass media prevention campaigns. In a course on persuasion theory, students must choose a theory and a target audience around which to design a media project to persuade others not to engage in specific alcohol or other drug-related behavior. Topics change each quarter and have included drinking and driving, bicycling under the influence, unsafe sexual behavior, and binge drinking.

For a bicycling-under-the-influence media campaign, one group of students used the theory of "image management" to create a campaign for sorority women with a poster pronouncing the following message:

We like to PARTY. We like to have FUN. We are SOCIAL and we like to be TOGETHER. . . . But we are also RESPONSIBLE and we always walk home TOGETHER. We value your FRIENDSHIP. Please DON'T DRINK AND BIKE. We're counting on YOU.

Basic Principles of Message Design

Social marketing messages that are consumer-oriented share certain characteristics that can be restated as principles of message design. In general, messages should reflect a thorough understanding of the behavior change process, the problem behavior of concern, and your target audience's current status and needs.

Direct messages to a well-defined target audience. In the argot of marketing, target audiences are "segmented" into subgroups with similar demographic traits, psychological make-up, lifestyle, and other problem-relevant characteristics.

Build your campaign around a unified theme that ties together no more than three or four messages. A high level of repetition is more effective than a diffuse campaign that tries to cover every important topic.

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PREVENTION UPDATES

Use messages that address your target audience's existing knowledge and beliefs. In order for a persuasive communication to succeed, it must anticipate the audience's points of resistance and then address them. Especially critical are your target audience's underlying beliefs about (1) the seriousness of the health problem, (2) their personal susceptibility to it, (3) the perceived effectiveness of the course of action being proposed, and (4) perceived barriers to executing that behavior, such as financial cost, inconvenience, pain, and lost time.

Communicate incentives or benefits for adopting the desired behavior that build on the existing motives, needs, and values of the target group in your messages. Commercial advertising often plays on people's insecurities, desires, and aspirations, and then "positions" the advertised product or service as a means of meeting those needs immediately. Likewise, health-promotion campaigns can emphasize benefits that are not related to health *per se* but to universal and more salient human desires for beauty, acceptance, love, security, status, or wealth.

Positive rather than negative appeals are generally preferred. Avoid being preachy or using a condescending tone in your messages, such as "Only a fool drinks and drives." Also avoid using fear-arousing appeals unless the fear is easily resolved and the message is carefully pretested. While fear campaigns are often easy to design, they rarely succeed and sometimes backfire. Even so, fear appeals continue to have strong intuitive appeal and are frequently used in social marketing campaigns, in part because focus groups usually rate strong fear appeals as highly motivating and effective. But remember that focus groups do this even when subsequent experimental studies show those appeals to be ineffective.

Choose campaign spokespeople who are perceived by the target audience to be trustworthy, credible, and attractive. Be cautious in using celebrity spokespersons. A celebrity is often used to draw attention and to show that what is being promoted is "in fashion." The risks in using this strategy are:

- the message may be overwhelmed by the celebrity's presence; perceptions of entertainment and sports stars often change very quickly
- celebrities can suddenly become newsworthy in ways that directly undermine the campaign or are otherwise inappropriate
- celebrities may unwittingly glamorize the behavior you are attempting to prevent by portraying their recovery as a heroic and rewarding struggle.

As you plan your campaign, seek opportunities to promote a product or service that is consistent with the campaign's message. A variety of products and services might be appropriate, ranging from clothing (e.g., caps and tee-shirts) and cookbooks to self-help groups and special events. Coupon books that offer free or discounted products and services whose use is consistent with the campaign are another option. Contest sponsorship is a related tactic. You can also emulate a marketing strategy used by tobacco and beer companies—the official sponsorship of sporting events, concerts, and other entertainment activities.

Emphasize the solution as well as the problem, and call upon your target audience to take some form of action. Accordingly, campaign messages should emphasize the modeling of new skills, demonstrating how various barriers to behavior change can be overcome, and teaching self-management and social support techniques for maintaining change.

How to Get Started

The resources listed below can help you and others on your campus, including college officials, faculty, and students, get started in developing a social marketing program.

On-Campus and Community Resources:

Your campus may have a marketing or communications department or courses you can turn to for assistance in developing your program, such as formative and background research, pretesting, and materials development. Local advertising councils are also a source of professional expertise. Some firms are often willing to provide *pro bono* services for worthy causes.

For additional information, contact :
The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention,
EDC, 55 Chapel Street, Newton, MA 02158-1060
800-676-1730 HigherEdCtr@edc.org <http://www.edc.org/hec/>

Just the Facts

Northern Illinois University (NIU) conducted a campus-based media campaign to give students more accurate information about actual levels of student alcohol and other drug use, which is expected to counter overestimations of such use and thereby drive changes in student perceptions of drinking norms. During the course of the campaign, NIU students have reported a 35 percent reduction in binge drinking and a 31 percent reduction in alcohol-related injuries.

The Golden Key National Honor Society adopted the campaign it is developing for implementation by its chapters nationally. For information contact the Golden Key Honor Society, 1189 Ponce de Leon Ave., Atlanta, GA 30306-4624. Tel: 404/377-2400 Fax: 404/373-7033.

Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention Messages

When developing messages aimed at preventing alcohol and other drug problems, including impaired driving, apply the following criteria:

1. Never state or imply that any level of AOD use is risk free or safe.
2. Do not imply that AOD use is the socially accepted norm at any type of social occasion or for any group or type of individual.
3. Portray abstinence as a viable and socially acceptable choice.
4. Do not glamorize AOD use nor depict it as a way to have a good time, to celebrate, to "fit in," to project a certain self-image, or to attain social or financial status.
5. Do not imply tacit approval or acceptance of illegal alcohol consumption by minors.
6. Do not employ recovering alcoholics or drug addicts as spokespersons.
7. Personalize the campaign to fit your campus.

Publications: • Making Health Communication Programs Work:

A Planner's Guide, Office of Cancer Communications, National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, MD: 1989 [NIH Publication No. 89-1493]. This manual offers guidance for planning a health communication program that is based on social marketing principles.

- Social marketing for public health, by D.C. Walsh et al. In *Health Affairs* (Summer 1993): 104-119. This article describes the field of social marketing as it is used to improve public health.

Organization:

University of South Florida, Department of Community and Family Health, College of Public Health MDC 56, Health Sciences Center, 12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33612-4799. Tel: 813/974-4867. Fax: 813/974-5172. USF sponsors Social Marketing in Public Health, an annual conference attended by a mix of health communications specialists, public health practitioners, and academicians.